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Disrupting the local: Sense of place in hyperlocal media

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Sense of place in hyperlocal media

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Abstract

Disruption of space and time is a feature of modern life, and nowhere is this more evident than in local communities, where outside influences routinely bring the world into our everyday lives. This study found evidence of disruption and Anthony Giddens' concept of disembedding in hyperlocal and community news, which focuses on a single neighborhood or distinct portion of a metropolitan or rural area. It studied media in the eastern suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio, where three hyperlocal and community news organizations compete to cover the same community: *The Sun Press*, a traditional community weekly newspaper; *The Heights Observer*, a "citizen journalism" publication run by community volunteers; and Patch.com, a national network of hyperlocal websites staffed by professional journalists (Cleveland Heights site only). Among the three, only *The Heights Observer* named more local than non-local places in its pages, in a content analysis of a sample collected in August 2013, when the three publications were at their highest levels of staffing. Furthermore, only in *The Heights Observer* were the five most-named places actually local—that is, located within the publication's stated coverage area.

Keywords

local news, hyperlocal, community newspapers, disruption, disembedding

Introduction

Disruption of space and time is a feature of modern life, and nowhere is this more evident than in local communities, where outside influences routinely bring the world into our everyday lives. This study found disruption in the most local of news media: hyperlocal and community news, which focus on a single neighborhood or distinct portion of a metropolitan or rural area.[1] In the eastern suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio, an ideal situation presented itself for research in an area known as The Heights. There, three hyperlocal and community news media compete to cover what is essentially the same community: *The Sun Press*, a traditional community weekly newspaper; *The Heights Observer*, a "citizen journalism" publication run by community volunteers; and Patch.com, a national network of hyperlocal websites staffed by professional journalists (only the Cleveland Heights site of Patch.com was included in this study).

Some key results: Among the three, only *The Heights Observer* named more local than non-local places in its stories, in a content analysis of a sample collected in August 2013, when the three publications were most fully staffed and functional. Soon afterwards, both *The Sun Press* and Patch.com made significant cuts to their staff and consequently, their coverage. Furthermore, only in *The Heights Observer* were the five most-named places actually local. The term "local" in each case refers to that publication's stated coverage area—each differs slightly from the others, but all include the entire city of Cleveland Heights.

Geographer Doreen Massey (1994, 2001), for whom disruption of the local is a central concept, says that while we often long for an imagined past when localities were untainted by external influences, there was never really a time when localities existed in isolation, without the occasional visitor with news from the outside world. However, it is a feature of modern life that localities are increasingly disrupted by travelers, businesses, and media that bring information, entertainment, and other goods that originate elsewhere. Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991) refers to this process as "disembedding", which is defined as the intrusion of non-local influences into localities. He names it as one of three central features of modernity and attributes its pervasiveness to the influence of mass media.

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[1] The term hyperlocal is used for the new breed of online publications, often run by people untrained in journalism known as "citizen journalists" (Metzgar, Kurpius, & Rowley, 2010), while traditional community newspapers are staffed by professionals, usually feature both print and online versions, mostly publish weekly or semiweekly, and have circulations of 15,000 or less (Abernathy, 2014). However, Abernathy notes that in recent years many small daily newspapers and ethnic publications have started to define themselves as community newspapers.

One place to observe and measure these phenomena is in news media, which are among the cultural means by which local communities establish and maintain themselves (Park, 1923; Wallace, 2005). Benedict Anderson (1991) invoked the idea of the "imagined community" to refer to the nation state, but to an increasing extent localities are places that require imagination to be sustained. In the words of anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1996), "locality is an inherently fragile achievement" that requires constant maintenance through cultural rituals and performance. These include festivals and ceremonies, but also cultural practices such as creating and naming pathways, streets, and buildings (p. 179).

The role of community and hyperlocal news

North American news media have played an important role in binding readers to their local communities since the earliest days of the penny press (when they first started to be aimed at a broad readership) in the 1830s. This was when local news became a staple of the metropolitan daily newspaper on this continent (Park, 1923; Wallace, 2005). As newspapers and other mainstream media began a steep decline in the late 20th century, reducing staff and cutting local coverage, part of this function was taken up by weekly newspapers and websites, referred to as "community" or "hyperlocal" news (Abernathy, 2014; Waldman & Working Group on Information Needs of Communities, 2011). While community newspapers have been around for a long time (Wallace, 2005) a new type of locally focused website began with the rise of the World Wide Web in the 1990s, taking advantage of a free publishing platform, and often unpaid "citizen journalists." These upstarts were tagged with the name hyperlocal, to distinguish them from their print predecessors. The definition used here comes from Metzgar et al. (2010):

> Hyperlocal media operations are geographically-based, community-oriented, original-news-reporting organizations indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement. (p. 774)

The contributions of the new hyperlocals are not insignificant, as a 2011 study by the Federal Communications Commission (Waldman & Working Group on Information Needs of Communities, 2011) noted:

> Perhaps no area has been more dramatically transformed than "hyperlocal" – coverage on the neighborhood or block-by-block level. Even in the fattest-and-happiest days of traditional media, they could not regularly provide

news on such a granular level. Professional media have been joined by a wide range of local blogs, email lists, websites and the proliferation of local groups on national websites like Facebook or Yahoo! For the most part, hyperlocally oriented websites and blogs do not operate as profitable businesses, but they do not need to. This is journalism as voluntarism—a thousand points of news. (p. 10)

This ongoing research project was born in the eastern suburbs of Cleveland in 2013, when three community and hyperlocal publications competed in a subset of the local area known as The Heights, with a population of about 100,000 (calculated from U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Each of the three had a slightly different coverage area, but all three covered the inner-ring, eastern suburb of Cleveland Heights (2010 census population 46,121) as part of that area. The situation presented an ideal opportunity to compare and contrast three media forms, old and new, to see how they fulfilled a particular role of local news that this author has been studying for some time: constructing sense of place. While previous research has examined sense of place in metropolitan daily newspapers, this study explores the concept in a terrain where one could reasonably expect it to be at its strongest. It sought to elucidate whether—and if so, how—three competing hyperlocal and community media differ in the sense of place they project about the same community. The three are:

- The *Sun Press* (print/online), a suburban weekly newspaper with an online presence on the website Cleveland.com, which includes 10 other Sun Newspapers (weeklies) and Cleveland's daily newspaper, *The Plain Dealer*, plus online-only content, all produced by professional journalists;
- *The Heights Observer* (print/online), a non-profit monthly newspaper with a corresponding website, written and edited by volunteer "citizen journalists" covering Cleveland Heights and University Heights;
- The Cleveland Heights website of Patch.com (online only), a national network of hyperlocal publications with a different website for each community, produced mostly by professionals with some citizen journalism on the sites.

Stories in the sample were collected on and around August 15, 2013, but due to the nature of the three publications, stories on each of their home pages dated back several weeks, so this was far from a one-day sample. However, the collection date was significant, as it was a time of abrupt transition at two of the three publications. In early August 2013, it was announced that most staff would be laid off at Patch.com.[2] In

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[2] Subsequently, the network was sold by its AOL founders to Hale–Global Enterprises, which continued to operate Patch.com but with a skeleton staff.

the same month, there was also a major reorganization at the *Sun Press,* with layoffs of most staff and consolidation within Cleveland.com, which now houses the entire Sun Newspapers chain plus staff formerly with *The Plain Dealer*, Cleveland's daily newspaper. *The Plain Dealer* still exists as a separate entity but some of its stories are shared on the Cleveland.com website. The effects of these changes had not yet taken full effect on the three websites, however, when the sample was collected. Articles dating back several months were still posted on the home page and in "tabs" that sort articles into major topics after they leave the home page. Thus, this sample reflects the three publications as they were *before* reorganization. It was intended to provide some baseline measurements to which future samples, as well as other media, could be compared.

Before explaining the methodology further, it is necessary to introduce the geographic and communicative concepts involved. The next section will do that, as well as provide a short history of the three publications under study.

Sense of place in newspapers

In geography, the academic discipline in which place is a central concept, the term "sense of place" has many meanings. Canadian geographer John Eyles of McMaster University has studied the construct extensively. Not just a matter of physical geography, the sense of place encompasses sociocultural elements and personal feelings, as Eyles (1985) theorizes. He lists several types of sense of place, ranging from the social to the environmental, some involving dimensions such as one's history in a place and one's sense of its potential for future happiness or prosperity. The relative importance of those elements differs between individuals and between places (Butz & Eyles, 1997). Stedman (2003), who has made an equally extensive study of the topic, stresses that an individual's sense of place is a combination of their personal perception of the physical environment, and social construction, a cultural aspect to which news media contribute. The latter construct is addressed by this study.

Certainly, geographers today see place as far more than points or polygons on maps. Nor is the concept restricted to a place's physical characteristics. In the 1970s, geographer Yi-Fu Tuan helped to start a sociocultural turn in geography by describing place as a phenomenological construct with social and cultural dimensions (Tuan, 1971, 1974, 1977). It is one's *experience* in a place that make it real for a person, Tuan insists, and that is something that develops over time. (Tuan, 1974). However, Raymond, Kytta, and Stedman (2017) argue that there are both "fast" and "slow" elements of sense of

place, such that one can have an immediate impression of a place as well as a deeper, Tuan-style sense of place that develops over time.

Bearing all this in mind, it can be seen that stories that focus on a place's *past and future*, as well as its *social characteristics* (Is it a friendly place? Is it crime-ridden? Is it affluent or poor? What individuals and families are prominent there?) and its *physical and natural environment* (Are there green spaces? Is it industrial or post-industrial?) are important to the sense of place constructed by news media.

News, like literature, frequently creates associations between places, *images and symbols*: for example, the Rust Belt, the Wild West, the Inner City, the Deep South. These representations, even if they evoke a distant or inaccurate past, can influence the present by conjuring a sense of place (Burgess & Gold, 1985; Eyles & Peace, 1990; Gutsche, 2014; Parisi & Holcomb, 1994).

All these things go into the construct often referred to as sense of place. Journalists and other storytellers, as well as artists working in various media contribute to constructing, or to use Hall's (1980) word, "encoding," perceptions of place, which are unique to each individual (per Hall, 1980).

Gutsche (2014) undertook a fascinating study of how this process works in journalism. "Understanding how journalists construct place adds depth to knowledge about news as a social and cultural construction," he says (p. 487) in his analysis of the process of "place-making"—attaching meaning to a geographical location—by journalists. He studies Iowa City's Southeast Side, which changed its racial makeup from "fairly racially homogeneous" and white in the 1980s to a neighborhood that was "home to the highest concentration of racial minorities in the city" in 2009 (p. 489). In describing how three local publications covered this change, Gutsche illustrates how "ideological constructions of place" (p. 495) occurs in news media through choices of language (for example, the term "ghetto") and story focus (in this case, an imbalance of stories on crime and disruption), and interpretations of the place that are not always those of residents, but often those of outsiders in official capacities, as Gutsche discovered in a series of interviews with residents, journalists, and officials.

In a similar vein several years earlier, Lindgren (2009) studied coverage of low-income neighborhoods by Canada's leading newspaper by circulation, the *Toronto Star*, in 2008. She found that coverage of these neighborhoods was less extensive than that of the downtown business area and "is dominated by negative subject matter

while, by comparison, news items about sports and arts and entertainment are the mainstay of downtown news coverage" (p. 91).

This content analysis took a different approach to examining sense of place, looking for those constructs after the fact by collecting references to specific places and recording the names of people and organizations, as well as any descriptive words associated with those places, in each of the three publications in the sample. It recorded each place name's frequency of occurrence, whether it was local (defined as within the publication's stated coverage area), and how many non-local places were named relative to local places in the publication overall.

While place names might sound like small things to study, they serve as connecting points, or hooks, linking readers to physical places and the stories/images/sensory information that construct—in the reader's mind—a sense of what the named place is like. For an example of this, see Appendix 1, which provides a complete list of the terms and names associated with the place name "Cleveland Heights" in the sampled stories mentioning this municipality central to each of the three publications. Notice the differences between the three publications, both in the volume and in the types of words chosen to attach to this place name. Each list is a "word picture" of Cleveland Heights, but the lists differ from each other. I have also made "word clouds" using these lists, which are shown in Appendix 2. However, the word clouds do not keep phrases together, instead using each word separately, so phrases like "a city for the arts" or "a phenomenal place for professionals and young families" are broken up into individual words. It is therefore important to examine the lists as well, to get a real sense of the tone and wording used to construct a slightly different sense of Cleveland Heights in the three publications.

News as a form of culture

It has long been acknowledged that news expresses societal values. Indeed, cultural studies theorists describe news as a form of culture that encodes and transmits the values of the surrounding society (Carey, 1988; Gutsche, 2014; Hall, 1997; Schudson, 1995; Tuchman, 1978). The particular values used by journalists to select and write news—known as "news values" — are outlined in nearly every journalism textbook (Brooks, Kennedy, Moen, & Ranly, 2010; Harrower, 2012) and include immediacy, prominence, novelty, impact, and proximity. The last on that list, proximity, figures significantly in community and hyperlocal news.

Yet not every hyperlocal publication focuses *exclusively* on its geographic community. Each has a different approach to the task of selecting what news to cover and which stories to publish. The choice of *where* news comes from is an element of the sense of place, since it can emphasize the local or de-emphasize it in various ways. Thus, the Research Questions were:

RQ1: How many of the people, places, organizations, and events mentioned in the publication are located within the geographic area the publication purports to cover? How many are located outside that area?

A publication that includes many stories from other places, or stories that contain no physical place at all, presumably constructs a different sense of place than one that covers exclusively one locality and its people. Among the three publications in this project there is a range of "localness" involved, and each could be found somewhere on that continuum.

RQ2: If all the words used to refer to a place or connect a person or organization to a place are listed, what other elements of the sense of place are invoked in stories?

The coding involved not only recording the addresses of places, people, and organizations mentioned, but also recording how they were mentioned: What different names were given to the same place, and what descriptive words as well as people and organizations were associated with that place? This coding produced sometimes extensive lists of place names, people, businesses, organizations, and informal groups—for example, if the place was a city hall, a school board headquarters, a community center, or a performing arts space, the people and organizations who gathered there would often be mentioned. In some cases, the names mentioned included the place's former name, if it had changed hands or closed. For example, in *The Heights Observer* there were many references to "the former Coventry School," which now houses numerous community organizations.

The sample

The oldest of the three publications, the *Sun Press*, was founded in 1946 as the *Shaker Sun*, which founder Harry Volk merged six years later with the *Heights Press* to become the *Sun Press*. It was the nucleus of a chain of newspapers that Volk expanded to six which, when he sold the chain in 1969, had a combined circulation of 140,000 in Cleveland's eastern and western suburbs (The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History,

1997). The chain went through a succession of owners until its most recent, Advance Publications (owned by the Newhouse family), acquired it in 1998. Advance also owns Cleveland's daily newspaper, *The Plain Dealer*, and the website Cleveland.com, which features material from both *The Plain Dealer* and the Sun newspapers, as well as original copy produced by Cleveland.com's separate staff.

The *Sun Press* covers the largest area of the three publications under study: the four municipalities of Cleveland Heights, Shaker Heights, University Heights, and Beachwood, all of which are "inner-ring"[3] suburbs on Cleveland's east side. It has a weekly print edition and a website that is part of Cleveland.com.

Patch.com is a national network of websites launched by Tim Armstrong and John Brod in 2007. In 2009, it was purchased by AOL (Stivers, 2012) which extended the network across the country, including sites in most Cleveland-area suburbs. In August 2013, Patch experienced significant layoffs. In October, the remaining staff in the Cleveland area bid farewell to readers and signed off. In January, AOL sold what remained of Patch to Hale Global. The websites remained operational until July 28, 2014, when the new owners began to revamp the entire network and remove previously available material produced prior to their takeover. Patch.com is still operating at this writing, but with a much smaller reporting staff.

The Heights Observer was founded in April 2008 as a non-profit, "citizen journalism" publication about Cleveland Heights and University Heights. It relies on local volunteers to write and edit stories. Its publisher is a non-profit community organization, Future Heights, whose objectives include promoting local businesses and organizations and building community (Fisher, 2013). It has a monthly print edition published on or about the first of the month, and a website which is updated whenever a story is ready for publication, sometimes daily. It has a small paid staff, also mostly untrained in journalism, and an advisory board that includes several professional journalists (prior to the start of this study, it included this researcher). Thus, this researcher has a participant-observer status with regard to *The Heights Observer*, but also has friends who work, or have worked, for each of the other two publications. Because the author resides in Cleveland Heights, relationships exist with many of the people covered by these publications as well.

Several measures taken in designing the methodology helped to avoid bias related to these preexisting relationships. The principal investigator avoided doing any

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[3] This expression applies to suburbs that are close to the downtown municipality at the core of the region—in this case, Cleveland—and older than some of the outlying suburbs, which developed later.

coding herself or discussing the research questions with the coders beyond their coding instructions. The only quantitative data collected were objective terms—place names—and the criteria for deciding whether they were local or non-local were also objective, and spelled out in a detailed Coding Rule Book. The coders used maps of the coverage area for each publication and located all place names relative to those maps. Intercoder Reliability Tests were done before starting the coding and after it was finished to ensure that coders were following the same criteria (see IRT results later in this section). When additional data was collected (names of people and organizations linked to these place names, and descriptive words and phrases used with the place names), these were for qualitative observations (see Appendices 1 and 2 for examples of the word lists that resulted). The decision to collect associated names of people and organizations was based on research by Lindgren and Wong (2012), whom the primary researcher visited in November 2013 to learn about their methodology. This project initially set out to create maps using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), as Lindgren and Wong had done, but the maps proved less useful than expected in envisioning the results because the places named in this sample were spread over wide and non-homogeneous areas, making comparisons difficult. Hence the decision to use the simple ratio of local to non-local place names, and to illustrate (in appendices) the lists or words associated with the place name Cleveland Heights, a central place common to all three publications.

The sample for this analysis was drawn from the publications' websites on or about August 15, 2013, however many of the stories on each publication's homepage on that date were from earlier dates.[4] The *Heights Observer* home page included all stories published from July 19 to August 19. The *Sun Press* home page included stories from August 1–16, and the Patch.com sample (home page and "Top News" tab) included stories from August 5–15.

Websites were used because each of the three publications had one, while one of the publications (Patch.com) did not have a print version. For the *Sun Press* and *Heights Observer*, all stories that appeared in print were published online, sometimes with additional material that was not in the print edition. With each story, the comments that appeared online under the story were coded as well, although *The Heights Observer* does not have a system for posting comments on its website, so there

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[4] The sample collection process took an entire day or more for each publication, so the collection date was not exactly the same for all three, but all were collected within a four-day span. Since older stories were included on each of the sites, August 15 was included in all samples. It should be noted that two of these publications tend to operate at a pace closer to that of a weekly. publications rather than dailies, though Patch differs, posting several times a day. For this reason, and also because of layoffs expected that day, Patch was collected first, on August 15th.

were no comments included for that paper. It's worth noting, however, that stories for *The Heights Observer* are written by readers and tend to be less objective than those in professional publications; as a result, some readers' opinions still made their way into the coding.

While all three publications posted stories first on the home page, with each new story taking the place at the top of the home page until it was superseded by the next story to be posted, only *The Heights Observer* and Patch.com moved stories into "tabs" with the names of various topics listed at the side of the home page after an appearance (sometimes of several weeks) in the main part of the home page. The *Sun Press* did not have this type of structure; it featured a home page with 54 stories at the time the sample was drawn. One could search for older stories, but they were not filed in tabs by topic. Further frustrating the searcher, tabs that appear at the top of the Cleveland.com website, where the *Sun Press* is located, include stories from all publications that share the website, not just the *Sun Press*.

When the home pages of the three publications were examined, the *Sun Press* and *The Heights Observer* had a similar number of stories (54 and 65, respectively) on their home pages, while Patch.com had significantly fewer. However, the Patch.com total came out to a similar number (69) if one combined the home page and stories in the "Top News" tab that were not on the home page but had been there prior to being moved into a tab. The total number of stories collected for each publication came out to 54 for the *Sun Press*, 65 for the *Heights Observer*, and 69 for Patch.com. Patch stories tended to be somewhat shorter than those in the other two publications, so it was decided that these numbers fairly represented the three for comparative purposes.

While two coders began this project, one moved away and was unable to continue after the initial stage of training and testing for intercoder reliability. It was decided to continue the project with one coder, but conduct later tests for intercoder reliability with the primary investigator, who had also done the initial tests with the two coders. This provided a check for consistency and reliability in the results and did not necessitate a long training period for a new coder. Krippendorf's alpha was used to calculate intercoder reliability because it takes account of intercoder agreement that could occur by chance, and is therefore considered more reliable than per cent agreement (Hayes & Krippendorf, 2007). Using the website ReCal (Freelon, 2011) to calculate the results for nominal data, a Krippendorf's alpha of 0.9 or greater was found throughout the tests. Note: there was only a single quantitative variable, i.e. whether each place name was local or non-local. The remaining items coded were qualitative elements.

Results

Table 1 shows the quantitative results of the coding of places named in each publication. It is important to note that a single story in the Patch.com sample contained almost half the total number of local places named (171 of 364) because it featured a real estate map plotting every building for sale in Cleveland Heights. The data for the map was obtained from Zillow, a real estate website, rather than being compiled by the reporters for Patch.com. Because this might not be considered equivalent to other stories, it was decided that two calculations would be made of the Patch.com results – one with and one without the place names from the map. Some readers might consider the map to unfairly skew the results; however, others would consider it a legitimate reporting effort that contributed to the overall sense of place. Indeed, one significant feature of Cleveland Heights at this time was the huge number of properties still on the market after the real estate crash of 2009.

Table 1: *Local versus non-local places named*

Publication	# Stories	# Local references	# Non-local references	Proportion local/non-local
Heights Observer	65	279	245	1.14
Sun Press	54	231	366	0.63
Patch.com	69	180	229	0.79
Patch.com with map	69	351	229	1.53

It is clear from the results that the *Heights Observer* has more local than non-local geographic references, since its local/non-local proportion (see column at right) is greater than 1. The other two publications have fewer local than non-local ones *if* the map is not included in the Patch.com results. When the map is included, Patch.com has the highest proportion of local to non-local names, at 1.53. These results were compiled by counting each geographic reference to a specific place in every story and totaling those numbers for each story. If a person or organization or descriptive word or phrase was associated with a place, those words were listed beside that place name. Therefore, if a particular place was mentioned in 10 stories, it counted as 10 place names in this tally. But if it was named twice in a single story, that counted as one mention.

Some of the most interesting results concerned the different sense of place one gets about Cleveland Heights as a city from the three publications, since this one community is covered by all three. These results (word lists associated with one of the most-used place names common to all three publications) are listed in Appendix 1.

In each publication, some places were mentioned in many stories. The city hall for each municipality and the school board headquarters, for example, were frequently named because so many meetings, policies, and initiatives covered by the three news outlets took place at those locations. Table 2 shows the five most-named places in each of the three publications and the number of stories in which each of these places was mentioned on the August 15, 2013 home page (or "Top News" tab in Patch.com). Note: all addresses in other major cities such as Columbus, Washington D.C., and New York were combined for all three publications. For Columbus and Washington D.C., most were government departments and agencies.

It is striking that only in the *Heights Observer* are all five of the top-named places local. Columbus, the state capital, came out first in the *Sun Press* and second in Patch.com, while Washington D.C. and New York City were in the top five for these publications, each of which had two non-local places in its top five.

Table 2: *Top five places mentioned in each publication and the number of stories (#) in which that place was mentioned*

Heights Observer	#	Patch.com	#	Sun Press	#
40 Severance Circle (Cleveland Heights City Hall)	22	40 Severance Circle (Cleveland Heights City Hall)	22	Columbus, OH (any address in state capital)	11
2155 Miramar Blvd (CH-UH School District HQ)	11	Columbus, OH (any address in state capital)	12	40 Severance Circle (Cleveland Heights City Hall)	10
2843 Washington Blvd (former Coventry School)	11	2155 Miramar Blvd (CH-UH School District HQ)	11	New York City (any address)	8
13263 Cedar Road (Cleveland Heights High School)	8	Washington D.C. (any address in national capital)	11	2300 Warrensville Center Road (University Heights City Hall)	7
2345 Lee Road (Cleveland Heights Public Library)	8	13263 Cedar Road (Heights High)	6	3400 Lee Road (Shaker Heights City Hall)	5

Also significant is the name of the third-ranked place on The *Heights Observer*'s list: "the former Coventry School," which now functions as an informal community center, housing quite a few local organizations. The name of this repurposed building is either unknown or not accepted by locals, who continue to refer to it by its former name. Yet this building (even if referred to by its street address) barely figured in the other two publications, appearing in just one story in the *Sun Press* and not at all in Patch.com. Note: the former Coventry School today houses the offices of The *Heights Observer* and its parent organization, Future Heights, but it did not at the time the sample was taken.

Conclusions

The clearest finding from this process of examining every geographical reference in three competing news publications, is that even in the most locally focused publications in North American journalism—community newspapers and hyperlocal websites—many of the places, people, and organizations referred to are not actually local. While this may not come as a surprise to most people, it is remarkable that in two of the three publications examined (at least, when one real estate map is excluded), *fewer than half* of the named places to which people, organizations, and things are connected are actually within the stated coverage area of that publication.

When the places most frequently mentioned on the three publications' home pages (and the "Top News" tab of Patch.com) are listed, the same two (the *Sun Press* and Patch.com/Cleveland Heights site) feature non-local places in two of the top five spots. Only the *Heights Observer*, an independent publication produced by citizen journalists, features (a) more local than non-local geographic references on its home page, and (b) only local places among its five most-mentioned places.

Perhaps the most interesting finding of this research for journalism as a profession is that the *Heights Observer*—an independent, non-profit hyperlocal produced by "citizen journalists" without training in the practices and traditions of professional journalism—produces what appears to be a significantly more local sense of place about the area it covers than do the two other publications. The question is, why is this happening? Does it demonstrate a failing of traditional journalism? Perhaps it illustrates a unique contribution that citizen journalism can make to local news. This remains to be seen in future research, but it certainly calls for more work on this type of publication and how it represents the local place.

A political economic approach could help to explain the difference between a small, independent publication like the *Heights Observer*, one that belongs to a regional chain like the *Sun Press*, and another belonging to a national network of affiliated websites like Patch.com/Cleveland Heights. The type of ownership (local versus regional or national; non-profit versus profit-seeking) is a major factor in that difference. News media that belong to chains, be they regional or national, could be expected to draw upon material produced by other publications in the chain for reasons of economy and efficiency. In this study, that tendency was seen in the Sun Newspapers, which are a regional chain in the Cleveland area, and in Patch.com, which is part of a national network of websites. Particularly notable in Patch.com was the fact that non-local stories were posted without adding what journalists call a "local angle"—that is, some way of making that material relevant to local readers by inserting quotes from local people, perhaps, or adding a few paragraphs about local events that fit a trend happening elsewhere in the country. Instead, the Patch editors who chose this material apparently saw hyperlocal stories from one community as being of interest to hyperlocal readers elsewhere. This is an interesting phenomenon that displays the tendency of chain-owned publications to use material produced elsewhere in the chain. It is something to look for in future research.

There are other implications for future research. Given that layoffs, ownership changes, and restructuring occurred around the time the original sample was drawn (though it had not yet taken full effect), it would seem appropriate to do a follow-up study of the same publications, after the layoffs and ownership changes saw their full effect. Research by Ferrier (2014) into the effects of the 2013 Patch.com layoffs indicated significant potential impacts. Patch.com has returned to business after a period of relative dormancy and restructuring under a new owner, but it is clear, even if only from the number of dormant sites (Ferrier, 2013; Ferrier, Lloyd, Sinha, Ratko, & Outrich, 2010–2015) and paucity of bylines on those that remain, that it is not at previous levels of employment. The *Sun Press* has reverted to its original editor after several years without anyone listed as editor (or anyone responding to emailed requests from the principal investigator for an interview). It would be fruitful to examine, several years later, how well the current efforts of the *Sun Press* and Patch.com/Cleveland Heights are faring with far less staff in this crucial task of the local news organization: building a sense of place.

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Appendix 1

These lists of names, organizations and descriptive phrases were recorded during coding as being associated with the place name "Cleveland Heights." Different ways of referring to the city (such as CH and "the city") were also recorded.

Sun Press, 11 stories mention this place and use the associated terms: Cleveland Heights, Ohio, the community, residents, voters, taxpayers, Heights voters, homeowner, in Cleveland Heights, our community, a leading progressive community, a city, the people of Cleveland Heights, our reputation as a city for the arts, a phenomenal place for young professionals and families, historic homes, beautiful public parks, walkable neighborhoods, CH, the city of CH, the city, our community, same community, CH lefties, Cleveland Heights voters, voters, city voters, the citizens, We the People in Cleveland Heights, their nuclear free zone, Garry Kanter, potholes on my street, this East Side suburb, road repairs, vibrant community, to residents, to the people of Cleveland Heights, aunt and uncle in Cleveland Heights, residents together, other residents, chicken owners, healthy living in Cleveland Heights, building community, Cleveland Heights man, the man

Patch.com, 37 stories mention this place and use the associated terms: Cleveland Heights, the community, parents, community members, everyone, the public, in Cleveland Heights, today in Cleveland Heights, in the city, to residents, residents, new business or relocating to a new storefront, block parties, block party, Cleveland Heights, Cleveland Heights residents, safe walking routes, homes, 553 home sales (2013), 403 home sales last year (2012), Cleveland Heights resident, backyard, in the community, your tax $, Cleveland Heights better, one person's view, new homes (in CH), Cleveland Heights, from the neighborhood, right here in Cleveland Heights, when you live in Cleveland Heights, Seth Boyle, hear drum circles playing, more Cleveland Heights Real Estate Listings, Cleveland Heights, the city of Cleveland Heights, Cleveland Heights Voters, Cleveland Heights residents, residents, they, their efforts, We the People in Cleveland Heights, 2,241 certified signatures, all those that signed, to improve Cleveland Heights, public hearing, CH as a Nuclear Free Zone, a neighbor, local pet groomers, veterinarian technicians, dog walkers, your experiences, in Cleveland Heights, a great city like Cleveland Heights, at home with family and friends, homes, Today in Cleveland Heights, Cleveland Heights, residents, businesses, cancelling community events, destruction of every green space left in the city of Cleveland Heights, the diners, input from the community, the city, in town, very special community of Cleveland Heights supporting, entire community, in Cleveland Heights, Kavon Key-Henderson, "Vonnie", Cleveland Heights teen, son, Sahasha Key,

Kavon's mother, my home, home, she, her son, Kavon's friends, family members, it's for our community, In the community, all children, support of the entire community, CH community, voting for us and with us, Today in Cleveland Heights, the city, wonderful city, beautiful city, CH, "Middle Class Suburbs," any resident, the voters, more renters, houses, owners, neighbors, addresses in our area, cut lawns, urban professionals, destroying every Green space, a former Cleveland Heights woman, her baby, her child, Kareema Cooper.
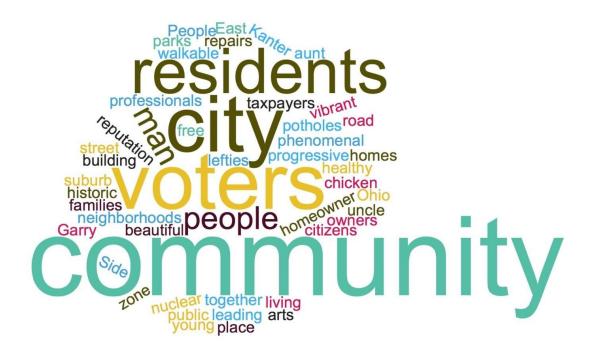
Heights Observer, 33 stories mention this place and use the associated terms:
Cleveland Heights, in the city, of the city, the community in general, in other areas of Cleveland Heights, sense of community, the public, within the city, the city, tax base, vacancies in commercial and residential properties, in the city, moved into the city, shopping districts, walkable neighborhoods, improving buildings that exist, problems with properties, banks, where to sell in the Heights, market area, residential streets, "Cleveland Heights is sinking fast," "an enjoyable experience in the Heights," street lighting and paving, vacant homes in neighborhood, private citizens, city hall parking lot, city's water system, improving city streets, rebuilding, city-wide services, residents, business districts, different districts, cameras in some locations, Cleveland Heights residents, views of the individuals, for the public, moved to Cleveland Heights, neighbors in Cleveland Heights, new Cleveland Heights, our community, City of Cleveland Heights, residential neighborhoods, inside the city limits, my home, the city, "most beautiful and diverse city in the United States," inner-ring suburb, our business districts and housing stock, vibrant community, here in Cleveland Heights; on public grounds, including parks, schools, libraries, day care centers; Cleveland Heights neighborhood, the community, our community, improvements to city parks, all the playgrounds, the city, neighborhood residents, for facilities and updates to our parks, Cleveland Heights residents, the city, city residents, street lighting in the city, city streets and parkways, scoreboard signs for athletic fields, any member of the community, local interest, candidates, candidates for office, residents, our residents Cleveland Heights voters, registered Cleveland Heights voters, engaged citizens, the voters, all voters of Cleveland Heights, community minded business owners, our community, the community, one resident, Collins was born, landlords, tenants, low to moderate income residents of Cleveland Heights, property owners, their yards and families, residents, voters, home owners, deer population, caring Cleveland Heights residents, young Cleveland Heights residents, neighborhood residents, Cleveland Heights residents, local elections, Cleveland Heights Move to Amend, democracy as a treasured tradition in Cleveland Heights, businesses in the Heights, our children; Cleveland Heights families, especially children; many residents, Cleveland Heights native, Antoine Dunn, Dunn, graduate, involved in the community, local nonprofits.

Appendix 2

These word clouds of the lists in Appendix 1 (descriptions, people, and organizations associated with the place name "Cleveland Heights") were created using www.wordclouds.com. Each word is used separately, so phrases are not kept together. The size of each word is proportional to the number of times it was used. The words "Cleveland Heights" were removed because their size was so large that other terms were too small to read. The colors do not have any particular meaning; they were used to help the viewer distinguish between words:

Sun Press word cloud for Cleveland Heights:

Patch.com word cloud for Cleveland Heights:

Heights Observer word cloud for Cleveland Heights: